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How the UK fell in love with Chinese food

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BBC Food



"You are seeing more regional Chinese food from Sichuan, Hunan and other areas of China," says Ken Hom

Chinese food has become one of the country's dominant ethnic cuisines since it was popularised in the 50s and 60s, but the taste for "traditional" Chinese restaurants is changing.

Chinese and Indian restaurants and takeaways are among the most popular in the UK, but they were also among the worst-hit in the recession.

Traditional Chinese restaurants have been struggling to compete with set-price pan-Asian buffets and modernised, specialist Chinese restaurants, according to a 2013 report by market researchers Mintel.

In fact Chinese food is no longer just a restaurant or takeaway treat - as more people are cooking it at home.

Beat the takeaway



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Sauce and ready meal sales have increased, according to Mintel. Sales of woks have gone up 46% each year at online retailer Amazon.

This is fuelled, according to Amazon store manager David Brittain, by "the desire for quick and healthy mid-week dinners".

Acclaimed chef Ken Hom is marking 30 years on UK television with a Chinese cookery masterclass at the Bristol Food Connections festival. He says attitudes towards Chinese food have changed "enormously".

"Chinese food at the beginning of the 80s was sweet and sour pork, mainly. Most Brits had a very stereotypical view of Chinese food," he tells BBC Food.

"Now you are seeing more regional Chinese food from Sichuan, Hunan and other areas of China. It is no longer just Cantonese food."

“ After they had a drink in a pub, they were hungry. Then they went to a... Chinese restaurant ”

Aubrey Ko British Chinese Food Culture project

Cantonese Dim Sum - small plates of food or parcels served in steamer baskets - originated in southern China, and has become a firm favourite in British restaurants.

But in fact there are eight regional cuisines. Hunan cuisine is associated with chilli and garlic flavours and its famous crispy duck; Fujian cuisine is known for its umami (savoury) taste and seafood dishes. Other styles include Sichuan, Shandong and Jiangsu cuisines.

Lisa Tse, chef and owner of Manchester's Sweet Mandarin restaurant, says when her grandmother Lily Kwok arrived in the 1950s, she helped to introduce new curried and spicy flavours.

"The locals absolutely loved those kind of flavours," says Ms Tse, who along with her sisters represents her family's third generation of women restaurateurs.

"Nowadays we're really very spoiled in the options and ingredients that we can use to make our dishes as true to the original as we can," says Lisa Tse.

But diners are now looking towards fusion Chinese and new flavours they haven't tried before.

"People are looking more towards spicy food," says Ms Tse, whose "volcano chicken" is a best-seller.



Sichuan food is known for its spicy kick thanks to its heavy use of Sichuan pepper



The spice "makes you feel a little numbing when you eat. But the smell is so good", says Dr Weng



His street food stall, Chilli Daddy uses family recipes for dishes such as noodle salad and beef hotpot

1/3

"It's spicy, it's savoury, it's got that lingering kind of tingling sense on the tongue."

Another popular item is a family recipe for clay pot chicken, which uses the unusual ingredient lap cheong - a Chinese sausage similar to salami, but not as sweet.

"If you were going for a more Anglicised Chinese meal you probably wouldn't try lap cheong."

One business capitalising on customers' taste for new flavours is Chilli Daddy in Bristol, which claims to be the first Sichuan street food stall in the UK.

Founder Dr Weng had expected local people to be unsure of his fiery food when he opened in 2011. But on his first day he sold out of everything within two hours.

"That proved we were wrong... the majority of local people like exciting, spicy food.

"Sichuan cuisine uses a lot of a unique ingredient - called a Sichuan pepper," he explains.

"It makes you feel a little numbing when you eat. But the smell is so good."

Chef and TV's MasterChef finalist Larkin Cen wants to modernise traditional Chinese takeaway dishes when he launches his business Hokkei in the summer.

Among his more authentic recipes, he hopes his "fusion" dim sum, filled with western-style pulled pork and short ribs will attract fans.



Crispy aromatic duck is thought to have been invented in Britain

"Dim sum's a very technical thing to cook. It's actually a very beautiful thing. I mean some of the techniques are just amazing."

He adds: "You're sort of taking techniques and borrowing ideas from both cultures and you end up with a product that still symbolises what Chinese food is all about - but you've just made it better I think."

Chinese food first arrived in the UK in the early 19th Century, when Chinese ex-seamen opened restaurants.

The first recorded establishment was called The Chinese Restaurant, and is thought to have opened in 1908 in Piccadilly Circus, London.

"During the 60s more people came here from Hong Kong," says Aubrey Ko, a research coordinator who worked on the British Chinese Food Culture project. "Chinatown started to develop in Soho in the 70s."

Food - like chop suey, was adapted to suit Western palates and to make the most of limited ingredients. "You can't find shop suey in China... just in the UK," says Ms Ko.

Beansprouts and onions were mixed with tomato paste and added to chicken or mushrooms to make the sweet and sour dish.

Most Chinese restaurants were seen as "chop suey restaurants", Ms Ko adds, although Chinese takeaways also dished out fish and chips.

Late opening hours were a big draw for patrons.

Festival of flavour



[Discover more about Bristol Food Connections festival, featuring Asian cooking with Ken Hom, Larkin Cen and Dale Williams](#)

"After they had a drink in a pub, they were hungry. Then they went to a takeaway Chinese restaurant still open during the night," says Ms Ko.

Ms Tse attributes much of Chinese food's popularity to its healthy potential, like stir fries low in calories and high in vegetables.

Ken Hom agrees: "Certainly all of the steamed dishes use almost no fat. Many soup noodles dishes are also quite healthy."

But Chinese food is also associated with controversial food flavour enhancer MSG (Monosodium glutamate).

The additive is found in some processed foods, including many sauces used in Chinese cooking.

It has been suspected of causing a hot flush reaction sometimes called "Chinese restaurant syndrome", but a direct link between the reaction and MSG has not been confirmed, and its use in food is regulated.

However some restaurants such as Sweet Mandarin choose to avoid it altogether.

"It's good that people are health-conscious and demanding better quality," says Ms Tse.

Dr Weng predicts smaller businesses with "authentic dishes" will now flourish, but Lisa Tse thinks the experience of going to a Chinese restaurant will keep tradition alive.

"A Chinese restaurant is a place where life happens. It's a place where people feel very comfortable."

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